

H U G H F E R R I S S

M E T R O P O L I S

Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center

June 6 – July 30, 1986



Chicago Tribune Tower, 1927

Hugh Ferriss (1889–1962) was the master draftsman of the American metropolis, real and ideal. As one of the nation's leading architectural delineators, he was hired to render hundreds of new buildings and projects in cities across the country, while as a visionary architect and author of *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929), he conceived an ideal city of majestic towers that seemed to embody the American dream of progress and prosperity. One of the many inspired reviewers of *Metropolis* hailed Ferriss as "a poet among architects, an artist who can translate in terms of steel, the soaring aspirations of men."*

Ferriss' expressive charcoal drawings mixed poetry and power in a twentieth-century version of the Sublime—he was awed not by the overwhelming forces of nature, but by the constructive energy of man. Exaggerating the monumental qualities of structures and suppressing ornament and detail, he reduced buildings to the profound power of their simple mass. His rich chiaroscuro renderings veiled the city in a mist of romance. In daylight scenes, he dissolved buildings in atmospheric effects, muting the dissonance of urban life, and for night visions, he drew dark and silent silhouettes against jazz lights.

Ferriss defined the art of rendering—which he contrasted to the mechanical act of drafting—as "an attempt to tell the Truth about a Building." His idea of truth was not a literal, visual veracity, but an interpretation of the architectural significance of a structure. "Buildings," he asserted, "possess an individual existence, varying—now dynamic, now serene—but vital, as all else in the universe." Like a portraitist, he sought to reveal "the emotional tone, the particular mood" of his subject, and like any great artist, he imprinted his own personality on every drawing.

"The underlying truth of a building," wrote Ferriss, "is that it is a Mass in Space." In his characteristic rendering style, Ferriss conceptualized the building as a simple, sculptural mass, first shading the entire form and blending the surface in smoothly modeled planes. Then, working like a sculptor carving from a solid block, he created details by lightening areas with an eraser or paper stump. This method seems to have evolved from his important drawings of the "zoning envelope" of 1922, developed in collaboration with the architect Harvey Wiley Corbett. Designed to study the limitations imposed by the 1916 New York zoning law on the maximum bulk of a building, these striking images impressed contemporaries with the beauty of the undisguised setback mass and significantly influenced the formal aesthetic of Art Deco skyscrapers of the 1920s.

Born and raised in St. Louis, Ferriss received a degree in architecture from Washington University in 1911. The following year he moved to New York and worked as a draftsman in the large office of Cass Gilbert until 1915, when he launched his long-dreamed-of

career as a freelance delineator. Most of his early commissions were for magazine illustrations and advertisements, but by the early 1920s, perspective drawings commissioned by architectural firms became his principal work. In 1922 he began to collaborate with progressive architects such as Corbett and Raymond Hood and to illustrate their visionary proposals. These commissions informed and inspired his own contemporary theorizing, and in April 1925 he mounted an exhibition of his drawings of the future city at the Anderson Galleries in New York.

In 1929, Ferriss published his masterpiece, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*. In it, he collected many of his finest drawings of the twenties, presenting new work only in the final section. Organized as a three-part thesis, the book examined contemporary design and projected trends, then proposed a vision of urban utopia. Ferriss illustrated an urban landscape of monumental setback centers, widely separated and hierarchically positioned in a geometric and symbolic city plan. In his text he charged that the contemporary city suffered from a total lack of planning and warned that architects must plan to preserve human values in the face of inexorable urban growth. Although it was published just after the Wall Street crash, *Metropolis* inspired ecstatic reviews and Ferriss was extolled as America's principal prophet of the urban future.

The Depression disillusioned Ferriss about the capitalist city and precipitated many changes in American architecture generally. In this, the second phase of his career, his practice and his stature in the architectural establishment grew steadily. He often served as official delineator and design consultant on large projects, such as the 1939 New York World's Fair and the United Nations Headquarters. In 1940, funded by a grant from The Architectural League of New York, he traveled across the country, sketching the most outstanding structures erected since 1929. He was attracted to factories, research centers, highways, and bridges—and especially to the great new hydroelectric dams of the West. Many of these drawings were exhibited in a one-artist show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1942 and were later collected in Ferriss' second book, *Power in Buildings* (1953).

Although trained as an architect, Ferriss elected to draw rather than to build—yet he nevertheless perceived his role as a form-giver and theorist. If today his grandiose vision of urban utopia contradicts the contemporary idea of a livable city, his images remain inspiring for their timeless beauty and humanist intent. They document the dreams of a man who believed that the ambition to rebuild the American metropolis for the benefit of all its citizens was an achievable goal.

Carol Willis
Guest Curator

*All quotations from Hugh Ferriss' writings are taken from Carol Willis, "Drowning Towards Metropolis," in *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, reprint (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1986).

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

In the following list, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York, is abbreviated as Avery Library, Columbia University.

The Fourth of July Parade, Convoyed by Airplanes, Passing the Public Library, New York, 1918

Charcoal on paper, 22½ × 16½
Prints Division, The New York Public
Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden
Foundations

View of The New York Times Tower, c. 1920

Pencil on paper, 17¾ × 10¾ (sight)
Collection of Corter B. Horsley

Study for the Maximum Mass Permitted by the 1916 New York Zoning Law, Stage 1, 1922

Carbon pencil, brush, and black ink,
stumped and varnished over
photostatic image on illustration
board, 26¼ × 20
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The
Smithsonian Institution's National
Museum of Design, New York; Gift
of Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

Study for the Maximum Mass Permitted by the 1916 New York Zoning Law, Stage 2, 1922

Carbon pencil, brush, and black ink,
stumped and varnished over
photostatic image on illustration
board, 26¾ × 20
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The
Smithsonian Institution's National
Museum of Design, New York; Gift
of Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

Study for the Maximum Mass Permitted by the 1916 New York Zoning Law, Stage 3, 1922

Carbon pencil, brush, and black ink,
stumped and varnished over
photostatic image on illustration
board, 26¾ × 20⅝
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The
Smithsonian Institution's National
Museum of Design, New York; Gift
of Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

Study for the Maximum Mass Permitted by the 1916 New York Zoning Law, Stage 4, c. 1925

Carbon pencil, brush, and black ink,
stumped and varnished on
illustration board, 26¼ × 20
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The
Smithsonian Institution's National
Museum of Design, New York; Gift
of Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

A Proposed Art Center for Manhattan, 1923

Charcoal and ink with touches of color
on paper, 22¾ × 39⅞
Regional Plan Association, New York

Reconstruction of the Temple of Solomon, bird's-eye view, 1923

Helmle and Corbett, architects
Black ink and charcoal on board,
29¾ × 38½
Avery Library, Columbia University

Buildings Like Mountains, 1924

Charcoal crayon on tracing paper
mounted on board, 11 × 8½
Collection of Ferdinand Eisemon

Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Building, San Francisco, 1924

Miller and Pflueger, architects
Charcoal pencil on paper,
32½ × 20 (sight)
Pflueger Architects, San Francisco

Crude Clay for Architects, c. 1924

Charcoal on Academy board fixed with
shelloc, 16¼ × 19½
Avery Library, Columbia University

The City at Night:

Descent into the Streets, 1925

Lithographic crayon on heavy wove
paper, 15¾ × 22¼
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The
Smithsonian Institution's National
Museum of Design, New York; Gift
of Jean Ferriss Leich

Farmer's Loan and Trust Company Building, New York, 1925

Storrett and Von Vleck, architects
Black crayon on paper, 26⅝ × 18⅜
Prints Division, The New York Public
Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden
Foundations

The Final Mass Carried Out in Steel, 1925

Lithographic crayon stumped and
varnished over photostatic image
on illustration board, 31½ × 23¼
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The
Smithsonian Institution's National
Museum of Design, New York; Gift
of Jean Ferriss Leich

The Lure of the City, 1925

Charcoal and pencil on paper, 15 × 22
Collection of Ann Ferriss Harris

Skyscraper Church, 1925

McKim, Mead, and White, architects
Charcoal pencil on board, 30½ × 20½
Avery Library, Columbia University

Steinway Hall, New York, 1925

Warren and Wetmore, architects
Charcoal pencil on board, 31 × 23
Collection of Jonathan Halper

**"Toward Tomorrow with Lehigh
Cement," 1925**

Charcoal on paper, 25½ × 19¼
Avery Library, Columbia University

Imaginary View of Angkor Wat, 1926

Charcoal on board, 20¾ × 31½
Collection of Jacqueline Jenks McCabe

The Ziegfeld Theatre, New York, 1926

Joseph Urban, architect
Charcoal crayon on paper, 33¾ × 30¼
Rare Book and Manuscript Library,
Columbia University, New York

Chicago Tribune Tower, 1927

Howells and Haad, architects
Charcoal pencil on board,
19¾ × 12½ (image)
Avery Library, Columbia University

Conceptual sketches for

**The Metropolis of Tomorrow, drawn
on the back of a letter, 1927**

Pencil on paper, 10 × 7
Avery Library, Columbia University

Pacific Edgewater Club,

San Francisco, 1927

Miller and Pflueger, architects
Charcoal pencil on paper,
32 × 48 (sight)
Pflueger Architects, San Francisco

Study for The Business Center, 1927

Pencil on tracing paper, 28¾ × 35
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Study for Visto in the Business Zone,
c. 1927**

Pencil on tracing paper, 21½ × 19½
Avery Library, Columbia University

J. L. Hudson Company, Detroit, 1928

Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls, architects
Charcoal pencil on paper, 28 × 24
Collection of Lucretia Hart Weddigen

The Merchandise Mart, Chicago, 1928

Graham, Anderson, Prast and White,
architects
Charcoal pencil on paper, 20 × 28
The Merchandise Mart, Chicago

Night in the Science Zone, 1928

Wolff crayon, paper stump, and
kneaded eraser, 17½ × 10½
Collection of Ellen Leich Moan

Philosophy, 1928

Charcoal pencil on paper, 38 × 22
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Smith-Young Tower, San Antonio
(now Tower-Life Building), 1928**

Robert M. Ayres, architect
Charcoal pencil on paper, 30½ × 17¾
Collection of Mrs. Robert M. Ayres

Study for Philosophy, 1928

Pencil on tracing paper, 40½ × 22
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Bank of Manhattan Company
Building, 40 Wall Street,
New York, 1929**

H. Craig Severance, architect; Yasuo
Matsui, associate
Charcoal pencil on paper, 72½ × 35½
Museum of the City of New York

Master Building, New York, 1929

Corbett, Harrison, and MacMurray,
architects; Sugerman and Berger,
associates
Charcoal on board, 47½ × 21½
Collection of Nettie S. Harch

Preliminary sketch, a Seaport, 1930

Charcoal pencil on tracing paper,
17¼ × 23½
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Preliminary sketch, a Skeletal Tower,
1930**

Charcoal pencil on tracing paper,
26½ × 16
Avery Library, Columbia University

Twin Office Buildings, 1932

Graphite, pen, black and red ink, and
dark gray wash on illustration
board, 22¾ × 16
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The
Smithsonian Institution's National
Museum of Design, New York; Gift
of Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

**Imaginary Pavilion Projected for the
1939 New York World's Fair, 1936**

Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon, architects
Charcoal pencil on paper mounted on
board, 21¾ × 16¾
Avery Library, Columbia University

**"A Visitor's First View of the World's
Fair of 1939," 1936**

Charcoal crayon on paper mounted on
board, 19 × 30
Avery Library, Columbia University

Perisphere and Trylan under Construction, 1939 New York World's Fair, 1938

Wallace K. Harrison and J. André
Fauilhaux, architects
Charcoal and charcoal pencil on
paper, $11\frac{3}{4} \times 19\frac{5}{8}$
Collection of Christopher Leich

**Perisphere in Construction, 1939
New York World's Fair, 1938**

Wallace K. Harrison and J. André
Fauilhaux, architects
Black chalk with touches of red,
orange, yellow, green, blue, and
white chalk on board, $17\frac{5}{8} \times 27\frac{1}{8}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

**The Demolition of the Hippodrome
("The Last Column"), c. 1939**

Black crayon on board, $12\frac{7}{8} \times 14$
Avery Library, Columbia University

Steel Parch, c. 1939

Pencil on board, $18 \times 13\frac{1}{2}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

Ohio Steel Foundry, Lima, Ohio, 1940

Albert Kahn, architect
Charcoal pencil on paper, $17\frac{1}{2} \times 25$
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Viaduct on Washington Heights,
New York, 1940**

Aymar Embury II, consulting architect;
John Evans, engineer
Charcoal pencil on board, $11\frac{7}{8} \times 17\frac{7}{8}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Cherokee Dam near Jefferson City,
Tennessee, October 9, 1941**

Architects and engineers of the
Tennessee Valley Authority
Charcoal on paper mounted on board,
 $10\frac{5}{8} \times 16\frac{3}{4}$
The Saint Louis Art Museum; Gift of
Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

**Johnson Wax Co. Building,
Racine, Wisconsin, 1941**

Frank Lloyd Wright, architect
Charcoal and charcoal pencil with
touches of red on French
charcoal paper, $17\frac{7}{8} \times 23\frac{1}{2}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Red Rock Amphitheater, Colorado,
1941**

Burnham Hoyt, architect
Charcoal and charcoal pencil on
paper, $17\frac{7}{8} \times 23\frac{1}{2}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

Cherokee Dam, c. 1941

Architects and engineers of the
Tennessee Valley Authority
Charcoal on cardboard, $29\frac{1}{2} \times 29\frac{5}{8}$
The Saint Louis Art Museum; Gift of
Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

Grain Elevator, Night View, c. 1941

Charcoal pencil on paper, 19×25
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Hoover Dam, Arizona-Nevada Line,
c. 1941**

United States Bureau of Reclamation,
Gordon B. Kauffmann, consulting
architect
Charcoal pencil on board, $25\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{5}{8}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona,
c. 1941**

Frank Lloyd Wright, architect
Charcoal and charcoal pencil on heavy
paper mounted on Bristol board,
 $15\frac{1}{4} \times 19\frac{1}{4}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

Bombproof Shelter, c. 1942

Charcoal on paper, $21\frac{7}{8} \times 30\frac{7}{8}$
The Saint Louis Art Museum; Gift of
Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

**Preliminary sketch, Shasta Dam,
Redding, California, 1943**

United States Bureau of Reclamation,
Gordon B. Kauffmann and Earl C.
Marris, consulting architects
Charcoal pencil on paper, $20 \times 17\frac{3}{4}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

**Zapotec Pyramid, Monte Alban,
Oaxaca, Mexico, 1943**

Charcoal and red on paper,
 $21\frac{1}{2} \times 24$
Collection of Jean Ferriss Leich

**Airplane with Boarding Passengers,
c. 1943**

Charcoal on paper with touches of red
and white chalk, $13 \times 22\frac{7}{8}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

Rockefeller Center, New York, 1947

Associated Architects of Rockefeller
Center
Charcoal pencil on board, 26×34
Collection of Jean Ferriss Leich

United Nations, Study #32,

Drawing 56, April 28, 1947

UN Headquarters Planning Staff
Pencil on paper, $15\frac{3}{8} \times 22\frac{7}{8}$
Avery Library, Columbia University

General View, United Nations

Headquarters, New York, 1949

UN Headquarters Planning Staff

Charcoal and charcoal pencil

heightened with white on paper,

21½ × 31

Collection of Jean Ferriss Leich

Proposed Development, Foley

Square, New York, c. 1949

Cameron Clark, consulting architect

Charcoal pencil on board, 29¾ × 23½

The Architectural League of New York

Lever House, New York, c. 1953

Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill,

architects; Gardan Bundshaft,

partner in charge of design

Charcoal pencil on board,

10⅞ × 10¼ (image)

Avery Library, Columbia University

Shelton Hotel, New York, c. 1953

(copy of a 1927 original)

Arthur Laamis Harmon, architect

Wax crayon on illustration board,

15⅞ × 11¼ (image)

Avery Library, Columbia University

**New York Zoning, three studies of
proposed zoning resolution on
Park Avenue, 1959**

Pencil on tracing paper mounted on
board, 13½ × 17

Avery Library, Columbia University

**Four site sketches, The New York
Times Tower, 1961**

Pencil on paper, 5 × 7 (each)

Avery Library, Columbia University

**The New York Times Tower Proposed
Renovation, April 24, 1961**

Pencil on paper, 20 × 14

Avery Library, Columbia University

Temple of the Dances, n.d.

Charcoal with touches of red, green,
and white pastel on board,

17 × 24⅞

Avery Library, Columbia University

The following Ferriss drawings survive in
the form of photostats, newspaper
reproductions, or photographs.

"Building a Battleship,"

The New York Herald Tribune

Graphic, June 9, 1918

Gravure on newsprint, 22 × 16

Collection of Carol Willis

**Convocation Tower, Madison Square,
New York, 1921**

Bertram G. Goodhue, architect

Photostat mounted on illustration

board, 23⅞ × 14⅞

Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The

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Museum of Design, New York; Gift

of Mrs. Hugh Ferriss

**"The New Architecture," The New York
Times Book Review and Magazine,**

March 19, 1922

Gravure on newsprint, 16½ × 22

Collection of Carol Willis

Eight photographs by Polmer

Shannon of Ferriss drawings, c. 1927

Base of a Two-block Building

Belden Project

Cubes and Pyramids

Fisk Building

Lofty Terraces

Reversion to Post Styles

Terraces

Vista in the Business Zone

Each mounted on paper, 17½ × 13½

Avery Library, Columbia University

**Empire State Building, New York,
1929**

Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon, architects

Photostat, 39 × 19

Avery Library, Columbia University

**Proposed 100-story Building for
Metropolitan Life, New York, 1929**

Carbett and Waid, architects

Photostat mounted on board, 22¾ × 13

Metropolitan Life Insurance Company,
New York

**"A Proposed Solution for New York's
Airport Problem," The New York**

Herald Tribune, Gravure Section,

October 1, 1933

Gravure on newsprint, 22 × 16

Collection of Carol Willis



Night in the Science Zone, 1928



Empire State Building, New York, 1929



Philosophy, 1928



Master Building, New York, 1929

**Whitney Museum of American Art
at Equitable Center**

787 Seventh Avenue
New York, New York 10019
(212) 554-1000

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Saturday 12:00–5:00

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Tours by appointment

Staff

Kathleen Managhan, Branch Director

Paula Breckenridge, Manager

Janet Mesrabian, Gallery Assistant

Allison Reid Shutz, Gallery Assistant

**The Museum and its programs
are supported by The Equitable.**

Hugh Ferriss: Metropolis

was organized by The Architectural
League of New York, with support from
the National Endowment for the Arts.

Exhibition Itinerary:

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Equitable Center, New York
June 6–July 30, 1986

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
September 20–November 8, 1986

The Art Institute of Chicago
December 2, 1986–January 18, 1987

National Building Museum, Washington, D.C.
February 4–April 30, 1987

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
June–August, 1987



JOSEPH URBAN ARCHITECT. EXECUTED BY JOSEPH URBAN, HON. ALBERT J. BARCHIESI

The Ziegfeld Theatre, New York, 1926